

Memories of East LA: The Story of Eloise

By Aaron Cornell

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East LA has its own rich history of culture, music, family, politics, and violence. In many ways, it's considered its own town within a town – separate from Los Angeles – yet an essential piece of the great metropolis. For those who have never been to East LA, driving down Whittier Boulevard might not provoke any particular feelings. However, for Eloise Gonzalez, who spent most of her life there, the drive takes on an entirely different meaning as she recalls the people, places, and events that shaped not only the culture, but her own life as well. Since World War II – when her father moved the family to East LA - most of her life has revolved around East LA: she married a local bandleader named Memo Mata and had four children with him; she opened a business (a music shop) on Whittier Boulevard; she experienced the political movements that came to resemble the voice of the Chicano culture in East LA, and – ultimately – she witnessed the boiling point on August 29th, 1970 in which the streets erupted in riots and chaos. Most research regarding the Mexican American community of East Los Angeles paints a picture of repression, anger, and revolt. While there is, without a doubt, much evidence to support that picture, there is a certain innocence and pride that shines through Eloise's memories of East LA that some publications fail to understand. Understanding Eloise's story helps to break many of the misconceptions of East LA as a rough-and-tough, gang infested hotbed. Instead, she helps to illustrate the softer side.

But who is Eloise Gonzales?

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Eloise Gonzales was born in Houston, TX on the 4th of July in 1932. Her mother, Guadalupe Salazar, came to work in Houston where she met Manuel Gonzales – her father – in 1931. Guadalupe, though her family moved to the United States when she was only one, would never become a citizen. Manuel was born in Mexico, but he moved to the United States when he was twelve years old. Later in his life he would become a full citizen of the U.S. The two were quickly married in 1931 and they welcomed Gonzales into the world a year later. Her very first memory in life was “going to catholic school in Texas. St. Patrick’s,” she says. “And being the priest’s pet. They used to call me his pet. This was in the forties. It had to have been... late thirties or early forties,”¹ she explains, while smiling. During the Great Depression era, between 400,000 to 500,000 Mexicans returned to Mexico². It was called: Repatriation. Even Mexican American families with children born in the United States were forced to leave. More than half of these families were from Texas. However, Gonzales and her family remained in the States. They were never forced to leave.

In a rare photo of her as a young child walking with her mother in downtown Houston, she describes the details: “This is a picture of my mother... and my aunt - her sister - and me as a little girl. We were walking downtown in Texas,” she says. “This has to be in the thirties. About thirty-five probably.”³ The black and white photo shows a very young Gonzales dressed in all white and holding her mother’s hand as they walk down the sidewalk with her aunt. The expression on young Gonzales is what makes this picture remarkable. She is looking up at her mother with a look of puzzlement. A few short years after the photo was taken, Gonzales would

¹ Gonzales, Eloise. Personal Interview. March 22, 2008.

² Robert McKay, “MEXICAN AMERICANS AND REPATRIATION,” Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/MM/pqmyk.html> (accessed May 1, 2008).

³ Gonzales. Interview.

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lose her mother due to complications in surgery. She would be raised mostly by her grandmother, Genoveva Vargas. However, there would be no shortage of love. When asked about her grandmother she describes her as being the “sweetest thing on earth. Very sweet. Very loving – very giving.”⁴

As World War II raged, many Latinos and Mexican American families moved to California to take advantage of the plethora of jobs available. In 1940, the number of Latinos was 374,000. However, by 1950, this number would jump to 1,009,400.⁵ It was during WWII that Manuel Gonzales - her father - had moved to Los Angeles to work in the shipyards. Unlike Manuel, who was already a citizen, a large portion of Latinos arrived in Los Angeles from Mexico during the bracero program. The bracero program allowed the United States and Mexico to relax their immigration rules so that the U.S. could import cheap laborers from south of the border.

Gonzales explains that:

During the war – the second World War – my father came to Los Angeles to work in the shipyards. And then he sent for us right after that. And we came over here [to Los Angeles] because all of our family was here – on my mother’s side... My grandmother’s sisters. She had two sisters. One that lived right there on Herbert [street], and another that lived a little further down in East LA. One of them was Anita Vargas on Herbert and the one over here on Michigan was Juana Vargas⁶.

Having moved to East LA, the Gonzales family soon moved in to a house on Herbert Street. The kids on her street came up with a slogan which Gonzales is only happy to repeat: “We’re not rough. We’re not tough, We’re from Herbert – that’s enough,”⁷ she says with a giggle. After World War II, East LA would see the largest expansion of Mexican Americans in the Los

⁴ Gonzales. Interview.

⁵ David Hayes-Bautista, *La Nueva California: Latinos in the Golden State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 17.

⁶ Gonzales. Interview

⁷ Ibid.

Angeles county.⁸ For the next ten years, Los Angeles county's Mexican American population would jump to almost 600,000.⁹

Soon she became completely embedded into the fabric of East LA. She made friends and attended Garfield High School, which would later become famous in the movie "Stand and Deliver" a film about Jaime Escalante. Escalante was a devoted math teacher who taught calculus at Garfield from 1974 to 1991. Gonzales would graduate from Garfield in 1951.

Shortly after graduating High School, which she says was actually very common for most kids in her neighborhood during that era, Gonzales became more interested in the local music scenes of East Los Angeles. She began to visit the various clubs that played Latin music. During the early fifties, the Latino music scene was exploding with life in East LA. Gonzales describes the various clubs: "Well, they had 'La Bamba'. And they had one called uh... on Second and Spring... 'Janitzio'," she says. "And they had another on Broadway and 6th called 'Babalu'. And one on the west side called 'Zarape'."¹⁰ The photo of Gonzales taken at club 'La Bamba' reveals a very beautiful young Gonzales – very charming. When I asked her to describe club 'La Bamba,' she said "That's before I got married – when I was going to the dances," she laughs. As life would have it, she met her first Husband, Memo Mata, at the club 'La Bamba.' She describes the scene at 'La Bamba':

La Bamba was a nice place. It looked sort of like a Hawaiian place – palm trees in there. And they had... they used to have floor shows and uh... the men had to be well dressed. They had to wear a tie or they wouldn't go in – they wouldn't let 'em in. [We met] At the night club: La Bamba. It used to be on Spring and uh... and Sunset Boulevard... He was always dedicating me songs, but he didn't know

⁸ Rodolfo Acuna, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 1984), 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰ Gonzales.Interview

my correct name – so he was dedicating me songs with a different name and I never turned around to thank him.¹¹

Mata was a local musician who first started performing at the club ‘La Casita.’ Soon he became one of the most popular band leaders in East LA.¹²

Like her parents, she had fallen in love quickly and married: Mata asked her out a few times and then they got married. When she describes Mata’s proposal, she says: “I just said yes.” And when asked if Mata went down on one knee? “Of course not,” she says – smiling. And, did he have a beautiful, shiny ring to present to her? “No,” she says, “he didn’t even have a ring. He didn’t get the rings till we got married [in] fifty-four.” And about her actual wedding, she says: “We just eloped. We just got married in Yuma, Arizona. We just left with his sister and her husband and we went over there and got married and just... came back.” The new Mata family settled in to a place on Mednik. “We lived on uh... Mednik. That was the name of the street. [Mednik] And Brooklyn - which is now called Cesar Chavez,”¹³ she says. Shortly after, in 1956, they would welcome their first son, Mark, into the world. And soon after that, Imelda, in 1958. Then the Mata family moved to the house at 4155 Whittier Boulevard – where they would live until 1970.

Memo Mata and his band would perform “On weekends – Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And sometimes during the week, but it was mostly Friday, Saturday, and Sunday,”¹⁴ Gonzales explains. During his musical career, Gonzales would meet famous local personalities such as Chico Sesma – the radio disc jockey and local Latino band promoter. Sesma would rise to fame

¹¹ Gonzales. Interview

¹² Steven Loza, *Barrio Rhythm: Mexican American Music in Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 73.

¹³ Gonzales. Interview.

¹⁴ Ibid.

for his Hollywood Palladium events. Acts such as Celia Cruz, Sonora Matancera, and the young Tito Puente would perform at Sesma's events. His shows became quite popular and they would always sell out. For many Latinos, the events were important to them because it was "their" night, and the bands were performing "their" music: Latin Music.¹⁵ However, Sesma's shows at the Hollywood Palladium, which usually catered to a white audience, would only take place on a monthly, biannual, or annual basis. It's important also to note that these events were attended not only by Mexican Americans in the area, such as Gonzales, but many different Latino nationalities attended such as: Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and El Salvadorians, etc.

In Gonzales's photo collection, there is a photo of a young Gonzales, her friend Mary Chavez, and the very famous Chico Sesma himself – smiling with his arm around Gonzales. I asked her about Sesma and she explained that "he was a musician - he used to play the trumpet or sax – or something like that. And then he was playing with his Cuban band... and he had his own radio station."¹⁶ In fact, Sesma did have a very popular bilingual radio show on KOWL.³

Music would continue to play an important role in their lives and the Mata family would soon open a business together: a music shop called "Mares Music Center" on Whittier Boulevard. Shortly after opening the store, they would welcome two more girls into the world: Melanie in 1960, and then Vanessa in late '61. Gonzales would run the store and Mata would continue playing shows with his band. Gonzales recalls fun nights with her children:

We used to go riding around at night... when they were small... we used to go with my girlfriend Luli and take them [the children] up and down the little hills there in East LA. And we used to go all over when we would close the store, and there wasn't school the following evening, we would go cruising all over the place.¹⁷

¹⁵ Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*, 84.

¹⁶ Gonzales. Interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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During the sixties, Whittier Boulevard became the main cruising area. In fact, Thee Midneters, a local band in East LA, wrote an instrumental anthem for cruising around in East LA. The song was called “Whittier Boulevard.”¹⁸ Gonzales recalls:

Well, the kids were all cruising down Whittier Boulevard. Because they made a song – by a group of kids from East LA that were called “Thee Midneters” and they made a song called “Let’s take a cruise down Whittier Boulevard.” And they used to play that all the time and the kids starting cruising on Whittier. Up and down, up and down. ...They started having to close the streets... so they wouldn’t let the cars go in there... otherwise they ruin the whole business on that street. On weekends – not during the week. But, they started Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.¹⁹

For Gonzales, cruising around with her children in the car was just a simple way to pass the time and have some fun. However, for many other Mexican Americans in East LA, cruising had a completely different significance.

Life on Whittier Boulevard was going well for the Mata family. However, lurking just beneath the surface throughout the community of East LA, was a tension that was building up. The United States became more and more involved in the Vietnam war, and in 1965 the Immigration and Nationalization Act was passed. For the very first time, a quota was now placed on the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States from Mexico.²⁰ Mexican Americans were dying in the war while, meanwhile back at home in the U.S., it was becoming more and more difficult for a Mexican immigrant to seek refuge in the United States in order to find a better life for their children, as well as better working conditions and wages.

The tension between the Los Angeles Police Department and the younger generation of Mexican Americans during the sixties began to burst at the seams. However, this was nothing new. The feelings of animosity had been prevalent for years. In 1942, police arrested members of

¹⁸ Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*, 99.

¹⁹ Gonzales. Interview.

²⁰ Acuna, *A Community Under Siege*, 140.

an East LA gang called the 38th Street Gang for the murder of Jose Diaz. For the next two years, the trial was sensationalized as “The Sleepy Lagoon Trial.” After the trial, the image of the young man in East LA – the “Pachuco” in a Zoot Suit – was tarnished. On June 3, 1943, a few sailors got into a fight with a few young Mexican Americans wearing Zoot Suits. Rumors spread throughout the naval base that these young “Zoot Suiters” had started it. For the next few days, servicemen went on a rampage through East LA. They attacked anyone wearing a Zoot Suit and stripped them of their clothes. Some even attacked African Americans and Filipinos in the area. When the Mexican government stepped in and requested an end to the violence then the superior officers of the base finally made the area of East LA off limits for the servicemen. Finally the violence stopped. The incident would go down in the history as the “Zoot Suit Riots.”²¹ During the “Zoot Suit Riots,” whenever the police were called in to help the “Zoot Suiters,” many Mexican Americans in East LA felt that the police would often side with the sailors.

By 1967, these bitter feelings were still evident throughout the community. Incidents with the Los Angeles police were still an issue. Young groups such as the ‘Brown Berets’ began preaching a more radical point of view than the older generation of Mexican Americans. For some, they represented the anger and frustration that many young Mexican American’s felt. For Gonzales, however, she says “I didn’t really agree with their beliefs. I didn’t agree with them, but... I was no one to question them.”²² The Brown Berets began as a simple civic-minded group called the Young Citizens for Community Action (YCCA), but changed their name to the ‘Brown Berets’ to reflect a more militant stance. Initially, one of their aims was to watch the

²¹ Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas, 1983), 167.

²² Gonzales. Interview.

police.²³ On November 24, 1967, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) responded to a disturbance call. By the end of that day, the LAPD had beat a man unconscious, slapped his daughter, and kicked his family as they forced them to the ground. As they were doing this, the officers called them “Mexican animals.” Afterwards, they arrested the family and charged them with assaulting an officer. During the trial for this incident, members of the YCCA showed up in front of the court to protest the brutality of the police.²⁴ The police took notice and began to harass the group. This harassment is what led the young members of the YCCA to change their name to the Brown Berets.²⁵ The Brown Berets fought for a new Chicano identity, awareness within their community, and promoting an understanding of the evils of the white establishment.²⁶ One particular member of the Brown Berets would eventually come to the aid of Gonzales and her store.

The sixties saw the rise of the Chicano movement. For many, the word *Chicano* came to represent a rejection of assimilation and an expression of cultural pride. For the older generation, however, the term *Chicano* was actually seen as a derogatory word.²⁷ The Chicano movement fought not only for their rights as citizens, but they also tried to create an identity for themselves – separate from the African Americans of the Civil Rights movement of the sixties. Ironically, many books written about the Chicano movement are actually placed directly next to books written about the struggle of the African Americans throughout the Civil Rights in bookstores and libraries. The overall aim of the Chicano movement, was to take the image of the Mexican

²³ Ian Haney Lopez, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

²⁷ Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*, 47.

American as this dark-skinned, lazy, dirty people, and transform it into an image of proud, cultured, family centered, individuals.²⁸

At the end of the sixties, the citizens of East LA were opening their collective mouths to finally voice their political beliefs – and it was a loud cry. Many students participated in the school walk-outs, and many took part in protesting the Vietnam War. Building up to the Chicano Moratorium, which would take place on August 29, 1970 and march down Whittier Boulevard in an effort to spread awareness of the Chicano movement and protest the war in Vietnam, the aggression of the LAPD was evident on numerous occasions. For example, on July 4, 1970, there were demonstrators protesting the deaths of Mexican Americans by the police. Sheriffs shot one man, and arrested 19 others. The crowd responded by breaking windows on Whittier Boulevard. It took 250 police officers to control the chaos. Also, a few weeks later, several LAPD officers, along with the San Leandro police department, shot and killed two cousins, Beltran and Guillermo Sanchez. The two cousins were undocumented workers. After screaming “Freeze” at the two young men, both of whom did not speak english, the officers fired. Afterward, it turned out to be an embarrassing case of mistaken identity. The day before the Chicano moratorium, the bodies of the two young men would be returned to Mexico.²⁹

On August 29,1970 the tension that had been building up throughout the community of East Los Angeles finally erupted into a full-scale riot between Mexican Americans protesting the war and the Los Angeles Police. Gonzales remembers that day well:

The riots – they started with a march going down Whittier Boulevard. And they, uh... there was a lot of hoodlums in that march. And, uh, it ended at Laguna park... And they went to a liquor store and started problems there – and that’s when the whole thing exploded. And they started breaking windows, and looting and robbing. And then they marched back down Whittier Boulevard – they

²⁸ Haney Lopez, *Racism on Trial*, 239.

²⁹ Acuna. *Community Under Seige*. 202.

marched back and they were breaking all the windows and looting and doing as much damage as they could.³⁰

The rioters finally made their way to Gonzales's music store, but she was successful in persuading them not to destroy it. She came out of her store:

To protect the place. Of course we had signs on the window! We wrote 'em real fast that said: 'Chicano Owned'. And they left it [the music store]. Because I would see them walking with a rock to throw in the window and I would say 'Hey! Hey! I'm a Mexican American!' And then the police came and they chased me out of the street saying 'Lady! Get back in that building!' I said: 'I'm only protecting my property!' The police were there. They marched shoulder to shoulder – the whole street. And they were walking with their rifles.³¹

While the riots raged up and down Whittier Boulevard, a certain Brown Beret came to help Gonzales: "They came to help me. One of them that knew me – George... I don't remember his last name, but he was a Brown Beret – he came and told me not to be scared and they weren't going to bother me... and this and that."³² Further down Whittier Boulevard – to the east of Gonzales's store – a young reporter who had covered the riots that day sat in a bar called the Silver Dollar Café. The Los Angeles Sheriffs department fired tear gas containers in through the front window. One of them struck the young reporter in the head – killing him instantly. His name was Reuben Salazar and he was a reporter for the Los Angeles Times as well as the news director for KMEX. Salazar was the first Mexican American reporter for the Los Angeles Times.³³ He covered the Vietnam war as well as U.S.-Mexican border issues. His killing was symbolic of the police brutality at the time. The officer who shot the projectile that killed

³⁰ Gonzales. Interview.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Mario Garcia and Ruben Salazar, *Ruben Salazar: Border Correspondent – Selected Writings, 1955-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 5.

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Salazar, Deputy Thomas Wilson, was never prosecuted.³⁴ After the day was over, three people would be dead, sixty-one injured, over two hundred arrested, and over one million dollars in property damage had been done.³⁵

Shortly after the riots, the Mata family moved away from East LA settling in the city of Pico Rivera – east of East LA. Pico Rivera, a town named after the last Mexican Governor of California, Pio Pico, was incorporated into a city on January 7, 1958.³⁶ Gonzales purchased a house in Pico Rivera from her uncle, Elias Garcia for twenty-one thousand dollars. She explains that “He bought it for twenty, and he told me that he just wanted me to take over the payments – and then when he saw that I was very interested in it - he raised the price to twenty-one thousand. Because, in those days, you couldn’t make a thousand dollars in a year!”³⁷ Although she kept her business on Whittier Boulevard – the music store (Mares Music Center) – she felt the need to leave East LA - the area she had lived in for most of her life. However, there is evidence that shows when most Mexican Americans left East LA it was not uncommon for them to move even further east. Some even as far as Azusa.³⁸ In her new neighborhood, in Pico Rivera, she enrolled her children into the schools of the local area:

Mark, Imelda, and Melanie started in East LA with Rowan Avenue Elementary School – before we moved over here [to Pico Rivera]. They went to... Miller Junior High... right here (points down the street). And Vanessa went to Valencia Grammar School. And then High School at El Rancho (again, points down the street). All four of my oldest went to school there.³⁹

³⁴ Acuna. *Community Under Seige*. 205.

³⁵ Garcia. *Ruben Salazar*. 3.

³⁶ Author Unknown. “City of Pico Rivera History,” Official Website of the City of Pico Rivera, <http://www.ci.pico-rivera.ca.us/cityglance/history.html> (accessed May 1, 2008).

³⁷ Gonzales. Interview.

³⁸ Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 169.

³⁹ Gonzales. Interview.

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All of her children would be raised to speak both English and Spanish. However, unlike her own schooling, only one of her children would attend Catholic School. The others were sent to public schools because of the high costs associated with Catholic Schools. Ultimately, she was concerned for her children and the environment they were living in. The move to Pico Rivera was convenient and it just made sense to her: “I wanted to get my kids into a nicer area,” she says. “I wanted to get them out of East LA.”⁴⁰

Two years after the move to Pico Rivera, Gonzales and Mata would separate and file for divorce. She would raise her children on her own while continuing to operate the music store on Whittier Boulevard. However, even the store could not keep her tied to East LA. Just a few years after the divorce she decided to close the store and retire. The last root to East LA had been severed and Pico Rivera became her permanent home.

Although East LA had been the center of her life, she still felt the need to leave. For Gonzales, East LA had changed. It wasn't the quiet community it used to be when she was growing up there. When she arrived in East LA, it was the era of post-war expansion. The expanding Mexican American community of East LA, in many ways, grew up with her. She spent her High School days at Garfield and then began getting more involved in the musical extravaganza that was shaping the culture of East LA in the fifties. She married Mata - a local, and rather famous bandleader at the time. The two of them rubbed elbows with many other entertainers such as Chico Sesma. The music and culture of East LA was so much a part of their lives that they opened a music shop on Whittier Boulevard – right in the middle of East LA. However, during the sixties, many Mexican American families did not have it so well. Tired of being quiet for so long, the Mexican American culture of East LA began to speak out – and,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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eventually, act out. Groups like the Brown Berets came to symbolize the Chicano movement and the resistance to the repression that many Mexican Americans were feeling. For Gonzales, the riots that took place on August 29, 1970 represented a corner that the community had turned. The riots symbolized how chaotic and loud East LA had become. While she considered herself a part of the community, she did not share the same enthusiasm for violence as evidenced in her story of how she stopped the rioter from breaking her window by shouting at them that she was a Mexican American. Also, ironically, though she did not “agree” with the ‘Brown Berets,’ it was George (the Brown Beret that knew her) that helped her guard her store and keep things calm.

It’s important to understand Gonzales’s story in the context of the history of East LA. Although East LA has experienced its share of political action, repression, and violence, it’s through the story of Gonzales where the softer side becomes more apparent. When she recites the famous catch-phrase that the children on her block created when they were growing up on Herbert Street in the middle of East LA, “We’re not rough, we’re not tough, we’re from Herbert – that’s enough,” you cannot help but smile.

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